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FORUM: ISRAEL-PALESTINE: ATROCITY CRIMES AND THE CRISIS OF
HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE STUDIES



Gaza as a Laboratory 2.0

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For quite a long time, Gaza has been seen as a laboratory. Most famously – a laboratory for Israel to test new weapons and security technologies that it can then sell around the world.¹ More profoundly – a laboratory for “observing an absence of dignity,” meaning “constant surveillance from the sky, collective punishment through blockade and isolation, the intrusion into homes and communications, and restrictions on those trying to travel, or marry, or work.”² On 7 October, Gaza became a laboratory for genocidal violence. I use this term to distinguish it from genocide per se, to refer to violence that has certain genocidal characteristics but not others. Famously, the atrocities committed by Hamas in Southern Israel have led many to name it a genocide. Equally (in)famously, many have described Israel’s war in Gaza as genocidal. Here I am mainly interested in how the events unfolding since the morning of 7 October reflect the dynamic of genocidal violence and the politics of genocide, without committing to the notion of genocide being perpetrated by any of the parties involved.

A good place to begin this discussion is what the planners of Hamas’ attack on 7 October were aiming for. Multiple motivations and objectives have emerged in statements by Hamas spokespersons and analyses by informed observers: the disruption of the normalization process between Israel and Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, which has threatened to marginalize Palestinians and their plight even further; the danger to the Al-Aqsa Mosque from the far-right government in Israel; the forced displacement of Palestinian communities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem; the release of Palestinian imprisoned by Israel; breaking Israel’s suffocating siege on Gaza; provoking Israel into Gaza’s quagmire; Hamas’ fundamentalist Islamist and antisemitic ideology – all have been cited as motivations for Hamas to attack Israel on such a devastating scale.³

Yet a particularly illuminating context, which has received relatively little attention, was suggested by Saleh Al-Aroui, the Deputy Head of the Political Bureau of Hamas who was recently assassinated by Israel, in an interview he gave to Al-Aqsa channel on 25 August, six weeks before the attack. Al-Aroui not only emphasized Israel’s abovementioned actions in Al-Aqsa, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank, but also placed it in the context

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¹ Antony Loewenstein, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation around the World* (London and New York: Verso, 2023).

² Rajaie Batniji, cited in Sara Roy, *Unsilencing Gaza: Reflections on Resistance* (Pluto Press, 2021), 221.

³ See, for example, Shira Rubin and Joby Warrick, “Hamas Envisioned Deeper Attacks, Aiming to Provoke an Israeli War,” *The Washington Post*, 12 November 2023; Tareq Baconi, “What was Hamas Thinking?” *Foreign Policy*, 22 November 2023.

of Israel's Finance Minister and head of the far-right Jewish Zionist party Bezael Smotrich's "Decisive Plan" from 2017. According to this plan, Israel should make clear that there is "room for only one expression of national self-determination west of the Jordan River: that of the Jewish nation." Israel should apply full sovereignty over this entire area, establish new cities and settlements throughout the West Bank and bring in hundreds of thousands of additional settlers. The Palestinians will thus have to "shelve" their dreams of self-determination, as Smotrich put it, and will basically have two options: they could either accept Jewish rule or leave.⁴

Al-Aroui noted that Smotrich, being responsible for West Bank along with Israel's Defense Minister, was now in a position to implement his plan, and was planning to transfer "at least one million settlers to the West Bank." Essentially, argued Al-Aroui, this government "says you either accept being our slaves, or we will uproot you from this land."⁵ He also pointed out that "the resistance" now had a unique opportunity, considering the internal division within Israel following the judicial coup attempted by the government and the mass protests against it, as well as the negative stance from the international community toward Israel's far-right government. Thus, it was precisely the moment to engage in a comprehensive battle: "Either we drive them out, or they drive us out."⁶

It is unclear to what extent Al-Aroui was aware of the specific plan to attack Israel on 7 October, as it seems to have been kept secret even from Hamas' leaders outside of Gaza. Still, the interview provides us with a glance into the mindset of Hamas's leaders and their considerations in the period before the attack. While extreme violence against civilians has always been part of Hamas' toolbox, and preparations for the attack that unfolded on 7 October likely began in 2021, the decision to carry it out at this particular moment was possibly aimed also to counter what was perceived by Hamas as a plan of ethnic cleansing, a classic "elimination of the native," that was supposedly being implemented by Israel. If true, it reflects a familiar dynamic: genocidal violence is often perpetrated as a response to a real or imagined existential threat, or in other words, a real or imagined genocidal violence by the enemy. Of course, this dynamic goes both ways: the prominence of figures like Smotrich in contemporary Israeli politics has much to do with the violence inflicted on Israelis by Palestinians in the last two decades, and with the perception that has been fully confirmed for Israelis on 7 October: that they confront fundamentalist and genocidal forces with which no compromise is possible. This brings us to Israel's war in Gaza.

The accusations that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza typically rely on the combination of Israel's conduct of the war, including indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, the cutting off of food, water, fuel and electricity, and the forcible evacuation of more than a million people from the North of Gaza; and the genocidal statements from virtually every senior official in the government. Those who have more intimate knowledge with Israeli political discourse know that it stretches much further and deeper than that, to numerous statements by journalists, commentators, current or past security figures and "ordinary" people and soldiers. Supposedly, to use Martin

⁴ Bezael Smotrich, "Israel's Decisive Plan," *Hashiloach*, 6 September 2017, <https://hashiloach.org.il/israels-decisive-plan/>.

⁵ Resistance News Network, "Interview with Hamas leader Saleh Al-Aroui," *Medium*, 25 August 2023, <https://medium.com/@resistancenewsnetwork/interview-with-hamas-leader-saleh-al-arouri-d5096cec8461>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Shaw's words in his contribution to this research forum, they reflect "the inner meaning of the 'war.'"⁷

Yet the assumption that there is a direct causal link between these expressions of intent and Israel's actions in Gaza is questionable. Granted, both reflect a deep dehumanization of Palestinians that has become pervasive in Israel. Still, rather than any plan to destroy the Palestinians or Gazans as a group or ethnically cleanse them out of Gaza, Israeli actions in Gaza reflect rage over Hamas's attacks and a determination that Hamas must be eliminated as a military, and if possible as a political force. True, many in Israel perceive all Gazans as supporters of Hamas and thus want to see Gaza completely destroyed and Gazans ethnically cleansed. Yet the army leadership tends to be more realistic and its decisions on how to conduct the war likely reflect the aims mentioned above and quite possibly – creating such a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza that Gazans would turn against Hamas or at least remember forever the cost of such attack on Israel as Hamas carried out. For Israelis, the new imperative is that 7 October never happens again, whatever the cost not just to Palestinians lives but also to Israeli soldiers and hostages. Israel really is seeking "permanent security" rather than to destroy Gazans or the Palestinians as a group,⁸ and one could hardly expect something else in light of the scale and brutality of the atrocities committed by Hamas, and the fact that the strategy of containing or "detering" Hamas has proven to be an abysmal delusion.

Paradoxically, it is the lack, rather than the existence of genocidal intent in Israel's actual war conduct that is instructive in terms of the kind of genocidal violence it reflects. Clearly, the war strategy that Israel has been pursuing can be carried out only when the general mindset is that Palestinian lives are completely expendable. It is surely an extreme, yet familiar pattern of what Moses has called "liberal" permanent security, where civilians are framed as legitimate collateral damage of a justified war against brutal enemies even when they are killed *en masse*. The focus on the genocidal statements made by Israeli officials, understandable as it is, obscures the way Gaza is a laboratory, namely a condensed and particularly brutal case study of the kind of violence that is more commonly ignored, downplayed or legitimized, including by genocide scholars, as long it does not rise to the "level" of genocide.

Thoroughly analyzing this dynamic, Moses has suggested we should drop the concept of genocide altogether.⁹ However, the wide use of "genocide" to describe Hamas's attack in Israel as well as Israel's response in Gaza demonstrates, as Martin Shaw points out, that the naming and claiming of genocide are here to stay.¹⁰ An alternative approach might be to question the focus on intent (as tempting and "easy" as it might be in the case of Israel's war in Gaza) more thoroughly, and to emphasize instead the foreseeable consequences of given policies. It might also mean recognizing how often treating certain lives as expendable can be as destructive of a group as any deliberate intent. Finally, it could also mean engaging more clearly and honestly with the politics of genocide.

⁷ Martin Shaw, "Inescapably Genocidal," *Journal of Genocide Research* (2024): 3, doi:10.1080/14623528.2023.2300555.

⁸ A. Dirk Moses, "More than Genocide," *Boston Review*, 14 November 2023, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/more-than-genocide/>.

⁹ A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Shaw, "Inescapably Genocidal," 5.

The Politics of Genocide

Some readers will surely suspect that my reluctance to characterize Israel's actions as genocide, full stop, has something to do with my being Jewish Israeli, and one should be suspicious enough of one's own biases to leave open the possibility that they are not wrong. It is both comforting and disturbing that this seems true across the board. For the Israeli French sociologist Eva Illouz, to take an example that has gained some attention, Israel's actions in Gaza may amount to war crimes, but clearly not genocide, while Hamas committed at least crimes against humanity and has clear genocidal intention against Israel.¹¹ For Rabea Eghbariah, a Palestinian human rights attorney and doctoral student at the Harvard Law School, whose essay was reportedly suppressed by the *Harvard Law Review*, Hamas' actions on 7 October amount to war crimes while what Israel has been doing in Gaza is clearly a genocide.¹² Both rely on the United Nations Genocide Convention (UNGC), and in both cases their national belonging not only seems to determine how they read it and how they frame the crimes perpetrated by each side, but also leads to quite a palpable reluctance to acknowledge the dialectic of violence analyzed above. It reflects a broader tendency, where many prefer to focus on intent (whether of Hamas or Israel) or structure (of settler colonialism or Jihadist Islamism), apparently because it allows them to downplay the contribution of the violence committed by the side they support to the increasingly genocidal violence of the other. *Pace* Patrick Wolfe, the kind of genocidal violence coming out of and into Gaza suggests that attempts at the elimination of the native or of the settler may often be a result of an event rather than of structure after all – namely, events of violence by one side that lead the other to respond in kind, with ever more ferocity.¹³

More broadly, responses to the events unfolding since 7 October seem to reflect the extent to which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become a matter not only of ethnic and religious but also of political identity and belonging, where it seems that almost anyone with political consciousness feel they have a stake in standing either with or against one side to the conflict, and often to express their politics in terms of which side has perpetrated a genocide and which atrocities have to be downplayed. Apparently, this includes enough Holocaust and genocide scholars to declare a “crisis” in the field. In this sense, Gaza can be seen also as a laboratory for the politicization of genocide due to its moral and political resonances, a process that has been going on since the creation of the UNGC, and particularly so since genocide has become a common term of reference in public discourse from around the mid-1990s, yet now seems to be reaching a peak.

This politicization is not necessarily a bad thing, and it involves genuine concerns and not just one's loyalties, or perhaps more accurately – genuine concerns that emanate from one's loyalties. One should surely take seriously Eghbariah's point about the “sense of moral hypocrisy that undergirds Western epistemological approaches, one which mutes the ability to name the violence inflicted upon Palestinians,” the ongoing “colonial

¹¹ “Genocide in Gaza? Eva Illouz Replies to Didier Fassin,” *K. Les Juifs, l'Europe, le XXI^e siècle*, 16 November 2023, <https://k-larevue.com/en/genocide-in-gaza-eva-illouz-replies-to-didier-fassin/>.

¹² Rabea Eghbariah, “The Harvard Law Review Refused to Run this Piece about Genocide in Gaza,” *The Nation*, 21 November 2023, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/harvard-law-review-gaza-israel-genocide/>.

¹³ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

condition that underpins Western legal institutions,” and the insight that Palestine “helps us rediscover the way the distinction between grievable civilians and savage human-animals is racialized along colonial lines in the twenty-first century.”¹⁴

Yet Illouz’s somewhat implicit concern is also important: framing Israel as a settler-colonial project has created its own distinction in the mind of many: between Israeli “settlers” – meaning all Jews in Israel – whose killing is justified or understandable, and indigenous “resistance fighters” who are morally uncondemnable even when they slaughter many hundreds of civilians in the most brutal way possible. Considering the importance of settler colonialism as a frame of analysis in genocide studies, we may do well to consider Gaza as a laboratory not just for the dynamic of settler colonialism and its contemporary relevance as underlying hegemonic legal, political, and moral frameworks, but also for the politics of applying this frame and its moral implications.

Still, whatever the merits and faults of analyzing Israel or Zionism as settler-colonial enterprises, Israel’s rule over the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza since 1967 has been a colonial project *par excellence*. Ultimately, the events unfolding not only since 7 October but throughout 2023 have been quite a remarkable case of the famous boomerang effect whereby colonialism comes back home, more quickly so when no ocean separates the colonial territory from the metropole. Against the background of a judicial coup pushed most strongly by the settler movement – for whom Israel’s “disengagement” from Gaza is a living trauma and a primary motivation for ensuring Israel’s high court will not stand in the way of the settlement project – Hamas’ leaders identified an opportunity. Gaza, rendered a laboratory for human suffering and indignity by Israel, has been an ideal place for hatred, rage, and ideological extremism to grow. The breaking of the border wall that has been built physically and metaphorically between Israel and Gaza, and the atrocities committed not only by Hamas militants but by “ordinary” Gazans was a gruesome and astonishingly literal manifestation of the colonial project coming back home. Such has been also Israel’s brutal response, carried out on a wave of “exterminate all the brutes” mentality in much of Israel, which has certainly contributed to its lethal war conduct even if, as I have argued, was not the determining factor in it.

Hannah Arendt, famously one of the first thinkers who tried to analyze the colonial boomerang effect, was also one of the relatively few observers from within the Zionist movement warning against the “iron wall” that Israel has been relying on to ignore Palestinian and more generally Arab grievances, namely Israel’s superior military power and the support it has received from Western powers. This wall has come crashing down in such a brutal and tragic manner that one can only hope, perhaps against all odds, that Israelis will come to heed Arendt’s warning from 1945:

A home that my neighbor does not recognize and respect is not a home. A Jewish national home that is not recognized and not respected by its neighboring people is no home but an illusion—until it becomes a battlefield.¹⁵

¹⁴ Eghbariah, “The Harvard Law Review.”

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, “Achieving Agreement between Peoples in the Near East – A Basis for Jewish Politics,” [1945] in Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 235.

Disclosure Statement

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Notes on Contributor

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